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Hopes growing for American chestnut after century of disease

BY GEORGE KRIMSKY REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

It was the tree of choice in the eastern United States. Whole communities depended upon it. Naturalists swooned over its majesty. Farmers built their barns and fences from it. Cabinetmakers relished its honeyed smoothness. People competed with animals for its fruit.

Then in 1904, the American chestnut started to die. An Asian blight raced like wildfire from state to state, ultimately destroying as many as four billion trees, or one quarter of the region's entire hardwood population.

The American chestnut still has not recovered. For most of the past century, those "chestnuts roasting on an open fire" and eaten on a winter's night have come from Asia and Europe. An awful lot of people — experts and amateurs alike — are trying to change that, and Connecticut is at the center of the effort.

"This was the greatest ecological disaster in modern history," said Bill Adamsen, president of the Connecticut Chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation, a citizen's group that is leading one of the state's recovery campaigns.

"We've made tremendous progress," he added, referring to the community of chestnut lovers working in forests, orchards and laboratories in at least 16 states.

The bark fungus that infected the American chestnut is believed to have come from a Japanese variety that was imported for decorative purposes in the late 19th century, and was first discovered in the Bronx Zoo. Other blights have felled species before, most notably the elm that was devastated by a foreign beetle, but those rallying for the chestnut note that it once was crucial to the eastern habitat and should be saved.

To read the complete story see The Sunday Republican or our electronic edition at http://republicanamerican.ct.newsmemory.com.

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